

the Dutch coast. LeMay simply hadn't seen them.

At Bushy Park, Eaker was filled with doubts whether he should recall LeMay. He knew that unless the 230 plane force for Schweinfurt didn't get off the ground soon they would be too late to take advantage of LeMay's diverting German fighters away from the ball bearing plants.

Lieutenant Colonel Beirne Lay, Jr., a member of the Eighth's headquarters staff, had volunteered for the mission and was in "Piccadilly Lily," a 100th Group plane piloted by Lieutenant Thomas E. Murphy. They were fifteen miles behind the lead 96th Group. His plane was flying at seventeen thousand feet, the lowest and most vulnerable position of all. He watched with approval as the group's twenty one B-17s tucked close for protection as they crossed the Dutch coast, with the 95th Group led by Colonel John K Gearhart leading the 3rd Combat Wing.

Eight minutes after the first flak at Woensdrecht, Lay watched nervously as 190s swept through the 2nd Bombardment Wing, Colonel Elliot Vandervanter's 385th Group, and Colonel Frederick Castle's 94th. He noted over the city of Diest that two B-17s started to smoke after they were hit, but they remained in formation. One German fighter also was hit, smoke pouring from its nose and metal flying off as it was hit by the massed guns of the formation.

From twenty-five thousand feet, fighter commander McCollum had seen twelve 190s dive toward the bombers, but he knew it was impossible to intercept them due to their speed and distance beneath his American fighters. Fifteen minutes later, McCollum spotted a 190 and, in a screaming dive, tore the German fighter to pieces with his eight heavy .50 caliber guns.

Now, his fighter group had reached its maximum range and had to return. Meanwhile, Colonel Hubert Zemke's 56th Fighter Group arrived to escort the bombers another fifty miles, as far as Eupen near the German border city of Aachen. Then, they, too, would have to turn back. Both fighter groups had new pressed-paper auxiliary tanks whose fittings had proved hopelessly inadequate. The tanks themselves broke apart easily. In addition, the 56th had flown its first mission only five days earlier, and they were still green.

Zemke was frustrated by the tactics of the German fighter pilots, who refused to engage until the American fighters were forced to turn back. Although he spotted fifteen or so fighters near Hasselt, ten miles from the Belgian German border, the Germans avoided contact, knowing that soon they would be able to attack the bombers without Allied fighter interference.

Near Diest, Zemke watched in horror as a B-17 exploded, plummeting to the ground in a huge ball of fire without a single crewman able to bail out. At 10:30, another bomber started going down near Maastricht. This time six airmen dangled from their chutes. Now, he, too, had to turn back, leaving the bombers without fighter protection. The Germans struck savagely as 109s and 190s darted through the groups firing 20 mm nose cannons and machine guns.

Lay listened with growing apprehension to gunners no longer able to call out individual attacks because there were so many of them. He could hear radio calls from commanders, advising gunners, "Lead 'em! Use short bursts!" The Germans now coordinated their attacks. Some came head on, either slightly above their altitudes or slightly below. Others attacked the rear as the sky was crisscrossed with orange tracer bullets and puffs of smoke from ground antiaircraft guns.

Just as LeMay's 2nd and 3rd Bombardment Wings received the brunt of the fighter attacks, twin engined Me 110s joined the fray, often diving out of the sun, knowing gunners would be blinded.

Meanwhile, the five combat wings of the First Air Division were still on the ground in England. At High Wycombe, Anderson faced a grim decision. The coordinated strategy had already failed. He hadn't dared to call LeMay's Third Division back once it was airborne because it would have had to drop its bombs in the English Channel with the danger of hitting Allied ships. With fog still hugging many of the First Division's bases in East Anglia, he had to decide whether to dispatch them more than three hours late to Schweinfurt. He knew that by the time they reached Germany, Nazi fighters would have refueled and would be waiting for them.

At Bassingbourne, Brigadier General Williams waited impatiently to get the word from High Wycombe to take off. He was so self disciplined and calm in a crisis that he was not upset by the delay. Despite the loss of an eye during the Battle of Britain, where he had served as an observer, the mustachioed Williams had been given the overall responsibility to lead the Schweinfurt mission. A disciplinarian himself, he was fully aware of the tough decision Anderson faced as he strode around 91st Group Operations swinging his swagger stick.

From High Wycombe, Anderson ordered the Schweinfurt groups to depart at 10:40 AM. He felt he had no other choice because the weather over the target was the best it had been for two weeks. Eaker, at Bushy Park, was relieved when he heard the decision. He had not interfered, respecting Anderson's judgment and knowing there was greater loss of morale if a mission was canceled once it was all set to go.

At 1:26 PM. Williams's force crossed the English coast and headed for Schweinfurt by way of Eupen, Aachen, Wiesbaden, and Darmstadt. It was now three and a half hours late. Worse than that, a third of his force had to abort; he led far fewer bombers than he had anticipated. No sooner had the First Air Division cleared the English coast than the Germans alerted their fighters to repel what they suspected was an attack on Schweinfurt.

The division was divided into two task forces, with the first under Colonel William M. Gross. Each force was almost ten miles long, one with 116 bombers and the other with 114, and flying in the clear while clouds still covered their bases in England.

Meanwhile, with LeMay's Third Air Division over Germany, Lay in "Piccadilly Lily" watched German fighters press attacks as close as fifty yards. Once, a fighter misjudged his distance and plowed into a B-17; the impact shattered both planes, and the combined wreckage plummeted to earth with no survivors.

The worst attacks on the rear wing began ten minutes after the last Allied fighters departed for home. About twenty 109s and 190s came in low at the rear of the formation; then, making 180 degree climbing turns, they attacked head on. Some fighters were hit, but a B-17 in the 95th Group and three in the 100th Group fell in flames.

Lay watched with disbelief as a copilot from one of the crippled planes somehow crawled out on the right wing of his bomber through a shell hole in the fuselage. Lay gazed at the man in utter horror because he did not have a parachute. Then, as he watched, the copilot clung to the shattered fuselage with one hand while he reached into the nose section with his other hand to get his parachute. He almost made it, but he lost his grip and his body was swept against the tail and he was hurled to his death. While Lay